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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 THE HAGUE 003304

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [MARR](#) [NL](#) [AF](#) [NATO](#)

SUBJECT: NETHERLANDS/ISAF: MOVING FORWARD AT A SNAIL'S PACE

REF: A. THE HAGUE 3240 AND PREVIOUS

[1](#)B. BLAKEMAN/FRIED/VOLKER 12/9/05 E-MAILS

Classified By: Charge D'Affaires Chat Blakeman, reasons 1.4 (b,d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: The Dutch Cabinet has delayed taking a decision on a proposed ISAF III Dutch deployment until December 19. Senior government officials will seek to use this time to convince remaining Cabinet members (primarily junior coalition partner D-66 ministers) and to build support for the mission in Parliament. Parliamentary leaders have been briefed on the details of the mission, but the major opposition party remains skeptical. Even if Cabinet makes a positive decision on December 19, parliamentary consideration of the proposal will likely require several weeks, and approval remains uncertain. Senior government figures are cautiously optimistic, but warn that the system needs to play itself out; attempting to force a quick decision will almost certainly lead to failure. End summary.

CABINET DELAYS DECISION...AGAIN

[1](#)2. (C) On December 9, the Dutch Cabinet considered for the second time the proposed ISAF III PRT deployment to Oruzgan province and -- again -- delayed taking any decision. According to Rob Swartbol, senior foreign policy advisor to PM Balkenende, Ministers Pechtold (Government Reform and Kingdom Affairs; D-66) and Brinkhorst (Economic Affairs, D-66) remained unconvinced despite positive briefings by Ministers Kamp (Defense, VVD) and Bot (Foreign Affairs, CDA) and CHOD Berlijn. Swartbol said that the Cabinet would revisit the issue at a special meeting on December 19.

[1](#)3. (C) In a subsequent discussion with Charge, Hugo Siblesz (MFA POLDIR) sought to put a positive spin on the postponement. He stressed that the tone of discussion inside the Cabinet was improving and said he was "reasonably optimistic" the deployment would eventually go through. He denied that the Dutch were looking for additional concessions from NATO or the U.S., emphasizing that the key issues in play are now almost exclusively domestic. The Cabinet decision to delay would provide some additional time to build support for a deployment in parliament, he stressed.

[1](#)4. (C) Kamp and Berlijn similarly emphasized the need for more time to build public and parliamentary support in separate discussions with DATT on December 10. Berlijn noted that he had personally briefed the senior leadership of all major parties (including PvdA, the largest opposition party) and saw positive movement from "all but one." Berlijn observed that bringing PvdA on board was necessary to ensure a two-year deployment through the May 2007 Dutch elections; without PvdA support at this stage, a post-election PvdA-led government would feel little compunction about pulling the plug on the operation. Kamp was equally adamant that a parliamentary "super-majority," including the PvdA, was necessary for the deployment to go forward. Both Kamp and Berlijn predicted that the PvdA could be brought around in time.

[1](#)5. (C) On December 12, Rob de Groot (Director of the Security Affairs Department, MFA) told POLCOUNS that the MFA and MOD "working level" were optimistic that Cabinet would make a positive decision on December 19. On that basis, the ministries were coordinating a strategy for dealing with Parliament. Since Parliament goes into recess on December 21, de Groot predicted that hearings on the deployment might not even begin until mid-January. De Groot stressed that putting some distance between the Cabinet's decision and Parliamentary consideration was not necessarily a bad thing, as it would give the government time to prepare a convincing case and perhaps allow emotions to cool. He noted that some steps, such as sending certain Dutch troops to Canada for training, could proceed without parliamentary approval.

PARLIAMENT GAMES

[1](#)6. (C) Parliamentary contacts polled informally over the past week made clear that the deployment still faces stiff opposition in the Second Chamber. Bert Koenders (PvdA Foreign Affairs Spokesman) told POLCOUNS on December 9 that he remains "highly critical" of the proposed mission despite

having received a personal briefing from Berlijn. Koenders stressed that he is not convinced Dutch troops will be able to carry out reconstruction work in a hostile environment, and expressed skepticism about measures to keep OEF and ISAF missions separate. Lousewies van der Laan (D-66 Foreign Affairs Spokesman) separately told POLCOUNS not to underestimate the level of concern among D-66 members regarding the "secret flights/renditions" revelations, which are now linked -- rightly or wrongly -- to the deployment decision. Despite their skepticism, however, neither Koenders nor van der Laan ruled out the possibility that their factions might eventually vote in favor of a deployment -- although both indicated they would vote against it if a decision had to be taken today.

17. (C) A firm supporter of the mission, Hans van Baalen (VVD Foreign Affairs Spokesman), predicted to POLCOUNS that the government would get a "slim" majority in Parliament without PvdA support, but worried that it would not proceed on that basis. He noted that while the PvdA leadership -- including Koenders -- can support the deployment intellectually, the party's "old-left" rank and file will be much more difficult to bring around. The last thing any party wants going into an election, he noted, is a major division between the leadership and the base.

COMMENT

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18. (C) Getting a decision in a consensus-based society like the Netherlands is slow and painful at the best of times -- and these are bad times. The Balkenende Cabinet has historically low polling numbers and is already widely viewed as a "lame duck" administration. The PvdA stands poised to dominate the upcoming elections, but also faces serious divisions between its old- and new-left wings -- as evidenced by the leadership's embarrassing failure to secure a positive party vote on the EU Constitutional Treaty last June. In this environment, it is practically impossible to separate politics from policy. That said, the Dutch have made difficult choices in tough times before, and the leading proponents of the deployment -- PM Balkenende, FM Bot, and DM Kamp -- all think they can secure a positive decision given more time. The one certainty is that a rushed decision will be negative. However frustrating, allowing the Dutch system to play itself out -- and resisting the temptation to force a quick decision -- may be our best option for securing Dutch participation in ISAF III.

BLAKEMAN